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ABSTRACT

This document describes the industrial decline in a small Midwestern town and its effect on education and the local economy. While some people refused to see a problem, others saw that the decline would continue until the town school closed and community services dwindled. The paper calls for new solutions to rural education and economic problems, even though the problems themselves may not yet be readily apparent. He cites a rising drop-out rate, suggesting that education officials broaden their mandate and link schools more closely to economic development and the community. He suggests that schools use their resources to serve other social needs in the areas of food service for the elderly, recreation, transportation, communications, library services, job training, and career counseling. Formal classes, traditional textbook study, the school day and school calendar are criticized as archaic. The paper notes that developments in telecommunications can totally change the concept of schooling. Leaders in educational change are asked to consider community needs and resources. A section at the end offers a general view of possible education reforms. The paper includes one chart comparing spending patterns in-town with those outside the town. (TES)

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Strategies for Solutions

by

Jerry G. Horn

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"Strategies for Solutions"

Jerry G. Horn

I would like to begin today by describing a community which may sound familiar to some of you. Westville is a town of about 1,300 residents bisected by a low volume state highway and two miles from a heavily travelled interstate highway. It has traditionally been a farming community, but about 10 years ago a substantial oil and gas boom occurred. The nearest population centers are two towns of less than 3,000 residents each, and they are 15 and 22 miles away. The closest city of 50,000 or more is 115 miles away. Although a railroad goes by Westville, the train no longer stops. Grain must be trucked to larger terminals.

There is one school district, which includes one junior-senior high school and one elementary school. Main street is about four blocks long, but fully one-half of the buildings are unoccupied. There were two banks in Westville until last year, when one that had been operating for more than 75 years was declared insolvent. The income from oil and gas has declined by almost 75% in the last three years. Last year, there were 18 graduates from Westville high school. Twelve went to college, and the other six have moved away, which is a consistent pattern. There is a weekly newspaper, which listed two "help wanted" ads last week. One was for work in the local nursing home at $3.35/hour, and the other for a temporary job fixing

fences on a ranch owned by a local physician. A survey by the Cooperative Extension Service found the following spending patterns.

	(%) In Westville	(%) Outside Westville
Banking services	75.9	24.1
Food for home consumption	68.4	31.6
New or used vehicles	7.3	92.7
Physician's services	56.3	43.7
Entertainment	19.3	80.7
Clothes for women	8.0	92.0
Clothes for men	7.8	92.2
Shoes	3.8	96.2
Clothes for children	3.1	96.9
Hardware items	57.8	42.2

A family-owned honey farm has developed a modestly successful business, largely due to its attraction of tourists from the interstate highway. However, its future is uncertain, since the owners are nearing retirement and their grown children have shown little interest in moving back to Westville. Within the community, the three persons recognized as "leaders" are nearing the age of retirement, and they are noticeably reducing their involvement in community affairs.

In Westville, most homes are left unlocked, and its citizens are proud of the fact that they take care of their own. School events, weddings and funerals are well attended. Occasionally, a new family moves into town, usually an older couple returning "home" or a family, often of Hispanic

extraction, who will be working on one of the farms or ranches owned by absentee owners.

Discussions with some of Westville's citizens resulted in the following comments.

- The town is dying -- there are no jobs, and all the young people leave.
- I like it the way it is - no crime and everyone knows everyone else.
- I'm sure glad those oil bums are gone.
- I wish there was something to do here for entertainment.
- You can't get anything in the stores.
- I really hate to buy out of town, but the prices are so high here.
- I wish I could choose from all of the classes that are found in big schools.
- The superintendent gets paid too much, and the teachers only work part of the year.
- I don't know much about the schools since my youngest graduated 15 years ago.
- We really need to do something to save the school, and then maybe the town won't die.

Do we have a problem? Some say the future of Westville and the towns like Westville is inevitable - the school will get smaller and smaller, it will be forced to consolidate with another district, and the town will die. Others will say there is nothing wrong - the people are happy and secure, there is a

low drop-out rate from school, standardized test scores are high, and a high percentage of students go on to post-secondary education. It even comes to mind that many might be saying - If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

This reminds me of a story about a monk who had been assigned to a monastery located at the top of a very steep cliff. The only access to the monastery was by a wicker basket raised and lowered by rope and pulley. When the monk was being raised in the basket to his appointed residence at the top of the cliff, he noticed the rope was badly frayed. Having some concern about this, he inquired of the attendant, "When do you fix the rope?" The reply was, "When it breaks." I say to you today, that whether you believe everything in rural America is okay or whether you believe it is broken, we must plan for the future and seek solutions to problems that we don't even know about now. I call on you to think far differently about rural communities, the role of the school in the community, and what schooling can be. Periodically and certainly within the past few years, some have engaged in school bashing rhetoric and in some cases actions that serve only to direct attention away from shortcomings of our society. Jonathan Sher focused on this in a speech he presented in October, 1987 at the "Education in Appalachia" conference when he said, "To the extent that corporate leaders can blame the education sector for our economic woes, they can direct attention away from their own short-sightedness, greed and poor management." Only a few years ago, schools were directed in a "Nation at Risk" and other

popular reports critical of education to narrow their focus and to get out of the business of offering courses in parenting, sex education and other "non-academic" courses. I need only to remind you of recent state mandates in several states for schools to now teach courses in human sexuality and drug and pregnancy prevention and to develop programs for "at risk students." Already, an increasing drop-out rate is being observed, and somehow we act surprised. College preparatory curricula are not for everyone, and it is big leap for a student to understand how studying German will help him or her earn a living in the local packing plant. As reported by Harold Hodgkinson in All One System, the states with the highest levels of retention of youth to high school graduation are Minnesota, North Dakota, Iowa, South Dakota and Wisconsin. But the percentage of the best of all 50 states (Minnesota) is only 86%. Have we, as communities, failed 14% or more of our youth?

In a recent study I completed in Kansas, it was clear that students, teachers, administrators and adults in rural communities believe their schools reflect characteristics of effective schools, and there are hard data to substantiate claims of academic success of their students. At the same time, we must recognize some of the limitations in curricular offerings, excessive demands on teachers and administrators, and the separation of the school from economic development and even the community itself in some cases.

In my opinion, we don't need to think about solutions to old problems. We need to reconceptualize the school and the future of our rural communities. The school is not an economic liability; and if economic development is your goal, the school is probably the largest single employer and the entity that purchases the most goods and services in your community. If your school closes, what local businesses will go belly-up? What will happen to property values? How much of your property taxes will follow your children to other communities or even out of the state or country?

As diverse as it is, the schools' mission is still largely one of education, but only for 6 to 18 year olds, an age group shrinking in numbers in many rural communities. Isn't it reasonable to think of the school as the educational agency of the community? Can we redefine its constituency as all citizens, regardless of age and previous education? Can the school also serve other social needs in the areas of food service for the elderly, recreation and entertainment, public transportation, print and electronic communications, library services, job training and career counseling, and other services not presently available in the local community?

Let's be creative and think about how the resources of the school can enhance the local community in each of the following areas.

a. Facilities

b. Materials and equipment

c. Purchasing power

d. Payroll power

e. Financial capacity

f. Political identity

g. Courses of study

h. Staff expertise

i. Students

Jonathan Sher contributed this list, but I suspect you can expand on it.

Returning to the educational mission of schools, I think we need to discard the notion of all students meeting in formal classes, studying from commercial textbooks, attending school in one location and expecting to be prepared for the future upon graduation. The concept of nine-month schools that are open from 8:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. is archaic and a gross waste of valuable resources. Telecommunications has the capacity of being a force to totally change the concept of schooling, but old ways must be changed and investments must be made. We need to visualize the school as a resource to be used to the fullest. Further, the school, its students and its curriculum must be partners with the community.

Clearly, adopt-a-school programs have heightened the interest of some individuals, but we must go much farther than that and a true partnership must exist. In some parts of the country, real businesses are being developed in local communities by students who are in effect combining their education with practical experiences. Additionally, the community benefits with a needed service, and such businesses

might provide a future for our young people in rural communities. However, I want to caution you about the possibility of either planned or unintentional exploitation of students or for that matter citizens of rural communities. Low paying, below poverty level jobs may be short-term gains and long-term losses.

Today, I have tried to expand your vision of schools and what they might be like in your community, related the school to community development, and given you a few examples for your consideration. While we may search for solutions, some will not fit your problems or help you move your community into the 21st century in a proud and productive way and where a quality of life exists. Clearly, your expectations cannot be reached by merely hoping for them. Finding persons like yourself who have vision, a willingness to take some risks and the skills and leadership to motivate others is the solution. Terrence Deal, author of Corporate Cultures, said, "People develop attachments to values, heroes, rituals, ceremonies, stories, gossips, storytellers, priests, and other cultural players. When change alters or breaks the attachment, meaning is questioned. Often, the change deeply affects those inside the culture as well as outside." It is within this context that you must provide leadership to move to a new culture for rural communities that is not "old rural" nor "new suburban." Finally, you need to focus on your community, its needs and its resources. The strategies are as varied as is reflected in what reportedly a Nobel prize winner replied when asked to define

science. He said, "Science is doing one's damndest, no holds barred."

We may need to uncover a little Donald Trump in each of us, who is described by some as America's most glamorous young tycoon. In his book entitled Trump: The Art of the Deal, he responded to the question , "What next?," by saying, "Fortunately, I don't know the answer, because if I did, that would take half the fun out of it."

I wish you success in your efforts as well as your results - both are very important.

With regard to the curriculum, I could envision a curriculum that would include offerings:

- taught face-to-face in regular classes
- available to individuals on computers, via satellite, on video discs (CD:ROM) or simply reading in the library
- taught cooperatively by school based educators and associates in the community

Overall, an individual student could choose from a large repertoire of curricular offerings, some offered in the school itself, some offered in the community and managed by the school, and others through some form of distance education.